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SUBJECT: MIDDLE EAST; FIDEL CASTRO; MERCOSUR AND VENEZUELA;
07/20/06

11. SUMMARY STATEMENT

Today's most important international stories include the war in the Middle East; Fidel Castro's probable visit to Argentina and the Cuban political transition; and Venezuela's incorporation into Mercosur.

12. OPINION PIECES AND KEY STORIES

- "The US agrees with Israel that the offensive should continue one more week"

Hugo Alconada Mon, Washington-based correspondent for daily-of-record "La Nacion," writes (07/20) "According to government officials from the US, Israel and the EU, despite the increasing international pressure for a ceasefire, the US and Israel have agreed that the military offensive against Hezbollah could extend one more week before starting negotiations that could lead to a truce.

"The UN and the EU are pressuring for a ceasefire in Lebanon as soon as possible. However, US President Bush supports the Israeli government's decision to weaken Hezbollah as much as possible as a prior step to diplomatic talks.

"The Republican administration suggested that only after the military objective is reached would Condoleezza Rice travel to the region, which is seen by her European counterparts as a highly risky bet of unpredictable consequences."

- "The US is reported to let Israel continue attacking for at least one more week"

Ana Baron, Washington-based correspondent for leading "Clarín," writes (07/20) "The US has granted Israel at least one week to finish destroying Hezbollah in Lebanon. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice will not travel to the region unless the work has been done. Is this the best way to defend US interests in the Middle East?

"All official analysts agree that destroying Hezbollah is necessary. The White House's spokesperson, Tony Snow, said that the Bush administration does not want to return to the point when violence broke out. Snow said, 'A ceasefire would leave the terrorist infrastructure intact, and this is unacceptable.' Bush himself said that Hezbollah, the root of the problem, should be destroyed.

"Nevertheless, independent analysts believe that, in the long run, this strategy will severely damage US interests.

"... Israel's attack against Lebanon represents the end of Bush's policy of democratization of the Middle East..."

"According to analysts, the US will even lose the confidence of moderate Arabs for having abandoned the Lebanon government to its luck."

- "Taking on the holy warrior"

James Neilson, contributor to liberal, English-language "Buenos Aires Herald," writes (07/20) "... The warriors of Hezbollah and Hamas think time is on their side. They already have the ability to hit Haifa and perhaps Tel Aviv and Jerusalem with missiles capable of causing a great deal of damage.

"Thanks to their backers in Iran and Syria, unless they are eliminated, they could soon dispose of much nastier weapons. Can Israel negotiate with them with the aim of assuaging their grievances? As they are against negotiations with the 'Zionist entity' on principle, such talks as do take place serve merely to strengthen them.

"And meanwhile, the Iranians, whose contempt for the West seems boundless, are busily working on their nuclear arsenal.

"Aware of this, some think that the ayatollahs got their proxies in Lebanon and Gaza to goad Israel into action in order to distract the attention of the rest of the world, especially the US, thus allowing them to edge nearer towards their goal.

"If that indeed is their game, they may have miscalculated. People in high places are coming to the conclusion that what we are seeing is the start of a jihadist offensive, so the long awaited showdown between the US and Iran could take place at any moment."

- "Victims and murderers, equally punished"

Leading "Clarín" carries an op-ed page by Silvia Bleichmar, a psychoanalyst, who writes (07/209) "... Paradoxically enough, Israel, as well as Zidane in the World Football Cup, has lost focus of what it represents for the world. And it performs actions that merge us in a lack of hope...

"The Palestinian people are not an invention of the postwar. Even when their foundation was defined by exclusion, once foundation took place, their existence is not subject to debate. Once founded, the State of Israel also has the right to settle down on the lands it inherited.

"Every terrorist action, whether performed by Hamas or the State of Israel, raises an ungrounded conflict without political or historic rationality."

- "Fidel, Chavez and a close transition"

Business-financial "El Cronista" carries an opinion piece by political analyst Jorge Castro, who writes (07/20) "Commander Fidel Castro will turn 80 in August. His political figure summarizes the entire current Cuban system of power. There is no political institution on the island opposing his will. All of them are instruments of his extraordinary power..."

"His possible visit (to Argentina) coincides with a turning point in South America's political life. The US has withdrawn from the region and is focusing all its efforts on the struggle against transnational terrorism, particularly in the Middle East (Iraq).

"To the US withdrawal, the Brazilian paralysis adds itself - Brazil tried to replace the US hegemony in the region. The outcome of all this is a lack of leadership and a vacuum of power in the region, which favors Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chavez's expansionist strategist - Chavez is Fidel's best disciple for the last 30 years.

"... Fidel Castro's sense of reality has made him leave behind his 'Marxist-Leninist' ideology. He only maintains his deep anti-US feeling, which is expressed today in a nationalistic and anti-globalization conviction. His death will mean the beginning of transition."

- "The debate of Mercosur"

Daily-of-record "La Nacion" carries an op-ed page by contributor Natalio R. Botana, who writes (07/20) "There is a debate in Mercosur... One of the problems is related to the uncertainty unleashed by Venezuela's incorporation into Mercosur..."

"Venezuela's incorporation has changed the focus of the discussion for two main reasons. First and foremost, Venezuela is an increasingly important oil power. While the war in the Middle East continues, the power of South American oil and gas will continue growing.

"... The history of integration among democratic countries reveals that success is achieved when integration is a project shared by governments and opposition sectors. The 'Bolivarian republic' of Venezuela is a clear demonstration that the opposition has very little to do there - it does not participate in elections..."

¶3. EDITORIALS

- "Humanitarian catastrophe"

Conservative "La Prensa" editorializes (07/20) "The battle unleashed by Israel in Lebanon after Hezbollah's new offensive has become a serious humanitarian catastrophe rather than another confrontation on an unstable border. This humanitarian catastrophe could worsen as the escalation of violence deepens.

"When Hezbollah crossed all political limits by expanding its military operations outside of the Chebbaa area and killing and kidnapping the Israeli soldiers, it was intolerable for the Israeli government, which had a parallel offensive from Hamas, and there was obviously coordination between the two sectors..."

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